

HAMSTER

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# A network of networks of networks built by believers that runs on belief

Erin Harrington

## **AXIOM**

I believe that the internet makes it easier to write and share criticism. I believe I can access and see more than I ever would have otherwise. I believe that it's easier to be lazy about sources when I don't have to rummage elbow-deep through archives that give me eczema. I believe that I've cultivated an accidental bias against physical artefacts that haven't been scanned and uploaded because online presence is a form of verification. I believe that I'm overwhelmed by ephemera. I believe I've lost the ability to write essays freehand. I believe I have a bias towards physical forms of art. I believe in smell. I believe in the liberatory potential of net art but I don't like looking at it. I believe that the internet encourages surface but not depth. I believe in googling an image while in bed because it came up in a book I'm reading and I don't recognise the title but then I realise that it's something I had seen after all and that I would never have understood these connections otherwise. I believe in databases. I believe half my professional networks come from Twitter and Facebook. I believe half my professional networks come from just showing up. I believe you shouldn't have to go to Paris. I believe in ad blockers. I believe in the Southern Cross Cable. I believe links will remain stable. I believe links will break. I believe in bookmarking things I'll never look at again. I believe that Stendhal Syndrome can't happen with a website. I believe that the internet isn't democratic and emancipatory. I believe my hard drives are indestructible until they frag and then I can't even remember what I've lost. I believe that wholesale deletions of Myspace and Livejournal accounts were terrible for arts criticism and practice, but great for me personally. I believe that this word processor is autosaving my work. I believe in watching the Vimeo video of *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (2015) on my smartphone and using it in the classroom. I believe my students don't know how to look past the first page of a Google search. I believe that algorithms are ruining me. I believe in livestreaming performance. I believe most gallery spaces can't shake off the cloak of elitism because there's still some person wearing a lanyard sizing you up as you come in the door. I believe in the temporal, spatial, and affective nature of experience and memory. I believe in listening to Spotify through my headphones while I'm walking through an exhibition. I believe in equitable access. I believe in the digital divide. I believe in the Wayback Machine. I believe its gaps and broken images are as expressive as its recollections.



Cropped screenshot, "The Physics Room: A Contemporary Art Project Space (11:20:57 GMT, 3 August 2001)", Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20010803112057/http://www.physicsroom.org.nz:80/index.htm>, accessed 20 July, 2020.

Cropped screenshot, "LHC: The First Band on the Net", CERN MusiCLUB, <https://musicclub.web.cern.ch/musicclub/bands/cernettes/firstband.html>, accessed 21 July, 2020.

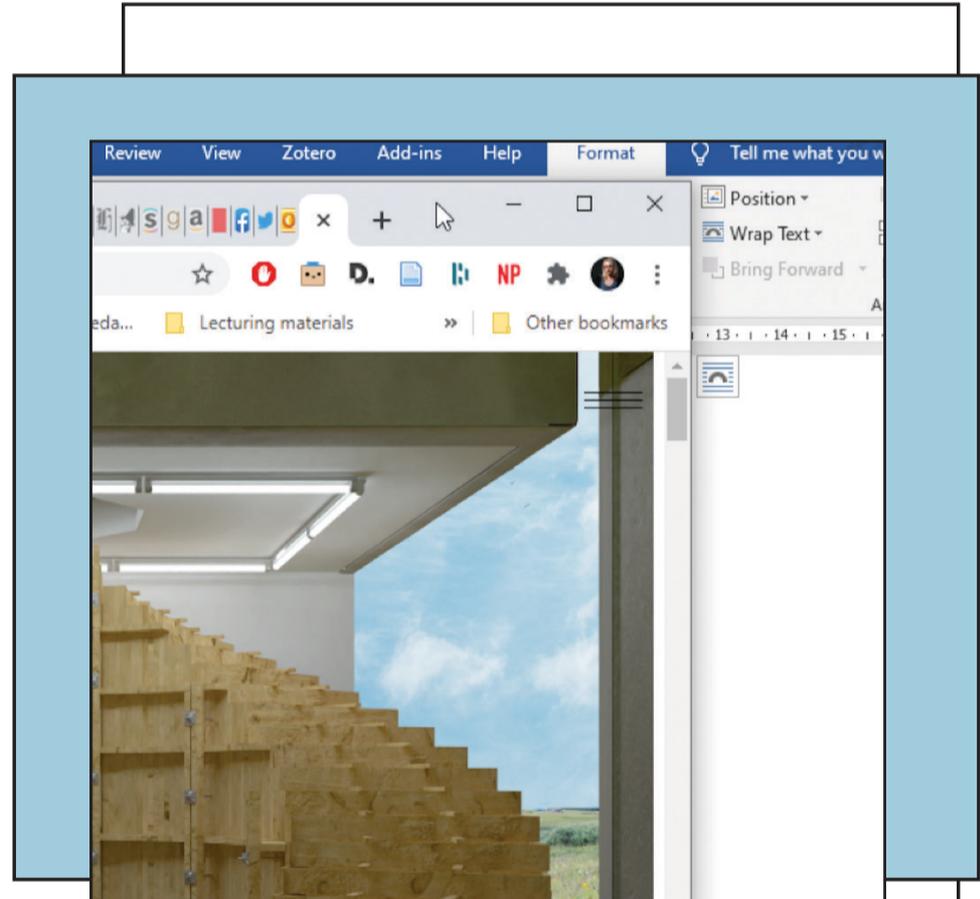


## IDEA

The first personal photograph, the first non-technical image on the world wide web was uploaded on 18 July 1992. It's a cute picture of the all-female pop group, Les Horribles Cernettes, comprised of European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) employees in 50s hairdos and frocks who sang parodic doo-wop songs about particle physics.<sup>1</sup> It was about 120 by 50 pixels and took a minute to load. The version I find online that's copyrighted by the original photographer is 1280x720p, although still blocky, and still charming. Does the tiny scanned image, the first of its kind, precede or follow the initial photographic image? Notions of primacy, authority, and originality become troubled, dragged along a headache-inducing Möbius loop. This little one certainly has a life: it is geriatric in net terms. It has proliferated for nearly 30 years as a JPEG, bigger now but still lossy and compressed, and still the same, the same, the same.

## HOPE

The stacked digital booths of the May Fair Art Fair are the Thunderbirds' Tracy Villa via Piranesi via 90s point-and-click adventures. The virtual spaces have parameters and a sense of scale, like the shoebox dioramas you'd make in primary school. Rooms next to rooms that don't add up, looking out to rendered fields and blue sky, not a person in sight. It's neat. Each interior is gently animated—an undulating aircraft cabin, a fig tree waving in a non-existent Mediterranean breeze, a glowing hot-pool bubbling away, make yourself at home. It works like this: at each stop is a booth (welcome traveller), some writing (curatorial, creative), maybe something else (a recording), then images of works for purchase and some digital ephemera. The format foregrounds the experience of browsing, forcing you through layers of paratextual materials because you're being softened up. For sale are works on board and paper and fabric, some physical artefacts like tiles and zines, altered objects. Some seem—inadvertently—very conservative in their form, their thingness, compared to the open promise of the space; this isn't quite Steve Dietz's "Ten Dreams of Technology".<sup>2</sup> But there's also Blaine Western's *Reduction*, a lovely 3D model of a half-built interior room in a house in the Californian "Spanish Eclectic" style.<sup>3</sup> It's designed from his memory of a building his father didn't finish constructing. A curving staircase that goes nowhere, arched doorways without frames, raw timber walls, and studs under strip lighting. It's a fragment, a thing and a plan, a set of digital instructions waiting to be realised, waiting for someone to believe in them. It makes me want to breathe it in.



Cropped screenshot, "Blaine Western | Booths", May Fair Art Fair, <https://mayfairartfair.com/booths/blaine-western/>, accessed 18 September, 2020.

1. "LHC: The First Band on the Net", CERN MusiCLUB, accessed 20 September, 2020, <https://musicclub.web.cern.ch/musicclub/bands/cernettes/firstband.html>.
2. Steve Dietz, "Ten Dreams of Technology", *Leonardo* 35, no.3 (Tenth Anniversary New York Digital Salon 2002): 509-522.
3. "Blaine Western | Booths", May Fair Art Fair, accessed 18 September, 2020, <https://mayfairartfair.com/booths/blaine-western/>.

## **SCEPTICISM**

I go looking for digital art collective JODI's online work *ICTI.ME* (2020), which replicates glitches found on social media.<sup>4</sup> The link is broken, and it's been appropriated, colonised by something scammy. The browser won't let me click through, even though I'm curious and promise not to touch anything.

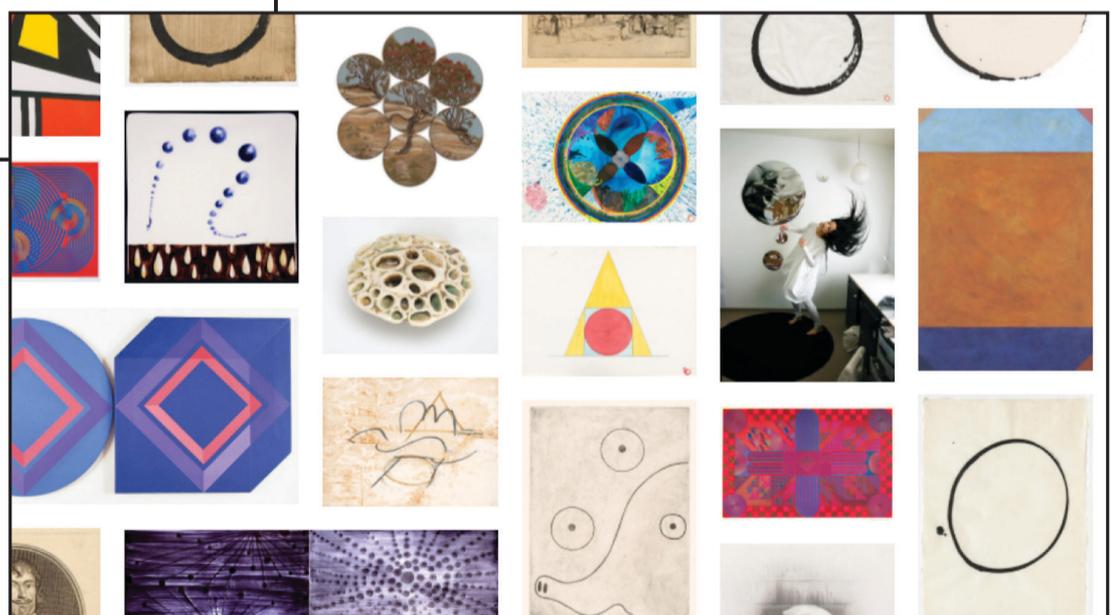
## **DIVINATION**

When artist and new media scholar Jon Ippolito asked "what does it mean to make art for the Internet?" in 2002, I wonder if he anticipated how soon it would be before we'd walk around with sophisticated computers in our back pockets, that we'd see the world through a 5.8" Super Retina XDR display, and that our online encounters would be funnelled through a handful of ultra-capitalist mega-platforms monetising our attention and manipulating our behaviour.<sup>5</sup> Mainstream tech utopianism now looks like Elon Musk bankrolling Kanye, not an art of the internet rejecting the market as a key mode of value. Most online galleries are just shop windows: real life stuff approximated in digital space. The tyranny of the white walls is now the tyranny of Squarespace and Helvetica.

## **MINDSET**

The Christchurch Art Gallery's website lets you curate your own gallery—an act of possessive individualism gone online. You can "collect all your favourite bits of the gallery in one place", everything you want and nothing you don't, but they are only images of some of my favourite bits, the bits that have been photographed and edited and shrunk into standardised boxes and made available online.<sup>6</sup> The "Lockdown – Bubbles" online gallery, from curator Felicity Milburn, is a portal to circles upon circles, all tagged appropriately, "circles (plane figures)", like with like.<sup>7</sup> Refresh the page and they shuffle around randomly. Eyes, suns, moons, frames, repeating patterns in a matrix of repeating patterns. I like colour and pattern so to me it's very pleasing. Here's Hotere's precise, fine, concentric circles. A vase that would strike fear into the heart of trypophobics. Max Gimblett's gestural white circle on black, a moon and a crown, a zen ensō, symbolising enlightenment and the void, minimalism, spiritual practice. I end up on Wikipedia; I am now an expert in zen circles. They are evidence of the body creating in a moment of freedom uninhibited by the mind, in a single exhale, circles open or closed in perfection or imperfection. The article needs further citations for verification; it is incomplete, and someone's using it to plug their own work.<sup>8</sup> Click back. Gimblett's circles float on the white page and not the white wall. They are lovely. But: I am sick of the Instagrammy squares and tiles, like an infinite computer-generated salon, like the bougie "curated" frame clusters photographed then put back on Pinterest; recursive. I also want to see other people's galleries but you can't unless invited. They are private. I want to know what circles I like that they don't and why.

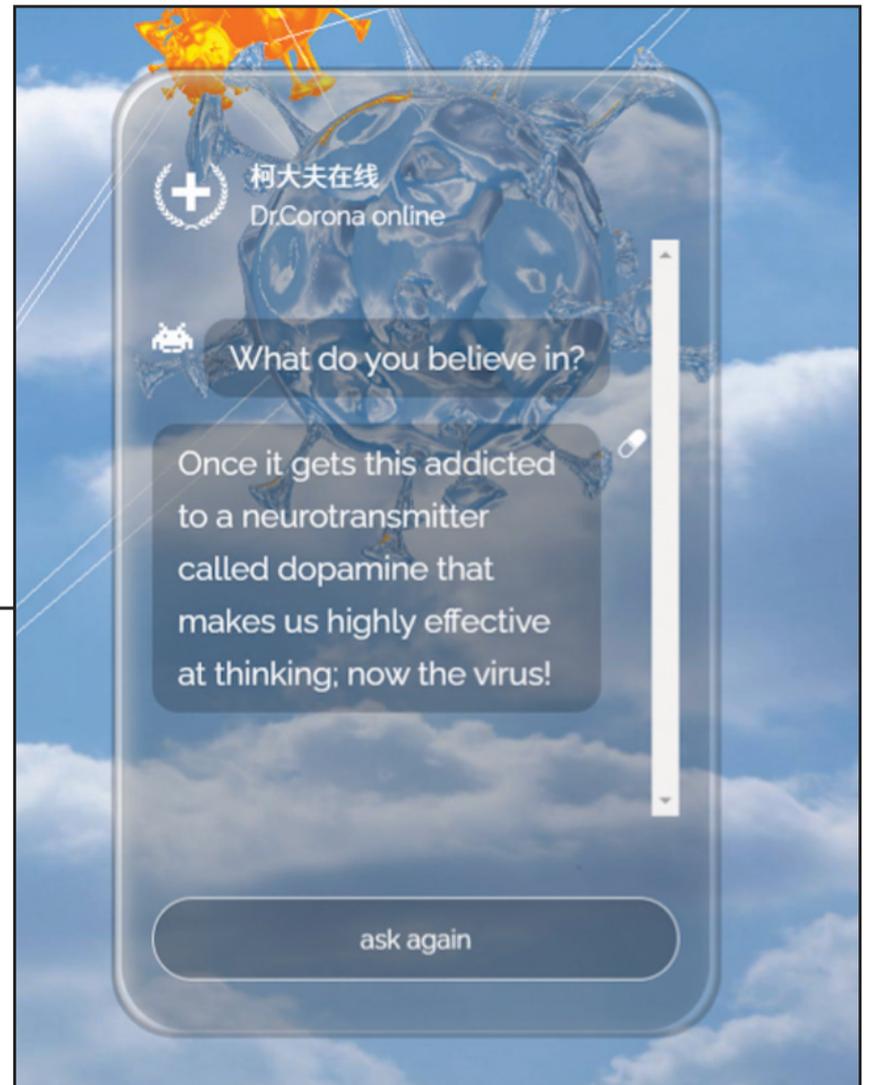
Cropped screenshot, "Collection", Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, <https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/collection/?tag=3288>, accessed 20 September, 2020.



4. *ICTI.ME*, accessed 20 July, 2020, <https://icti.me>.
5. Jon Ippolito, "Ten Dreams of Technology", *Leonardo* 35, no.3 (Tenth Anniversary New York Digital Salon 2002): 485-498.
6. "My Gallery", Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, accessed 20 September, 2020, <https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/mygallery/>.
7. "Lockdown – Bubbles", Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, accessed 20 September, 2020, <https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/mygallery/ifjkmp>.
8. "Talk:Ensō", Wikipedia, accessed 20 September, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Ens%C5%8D#/\\*\\_Artist\\_\\*/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Ens%C5%8D#/*_Artist_*/).

**KNOWLEDGE**

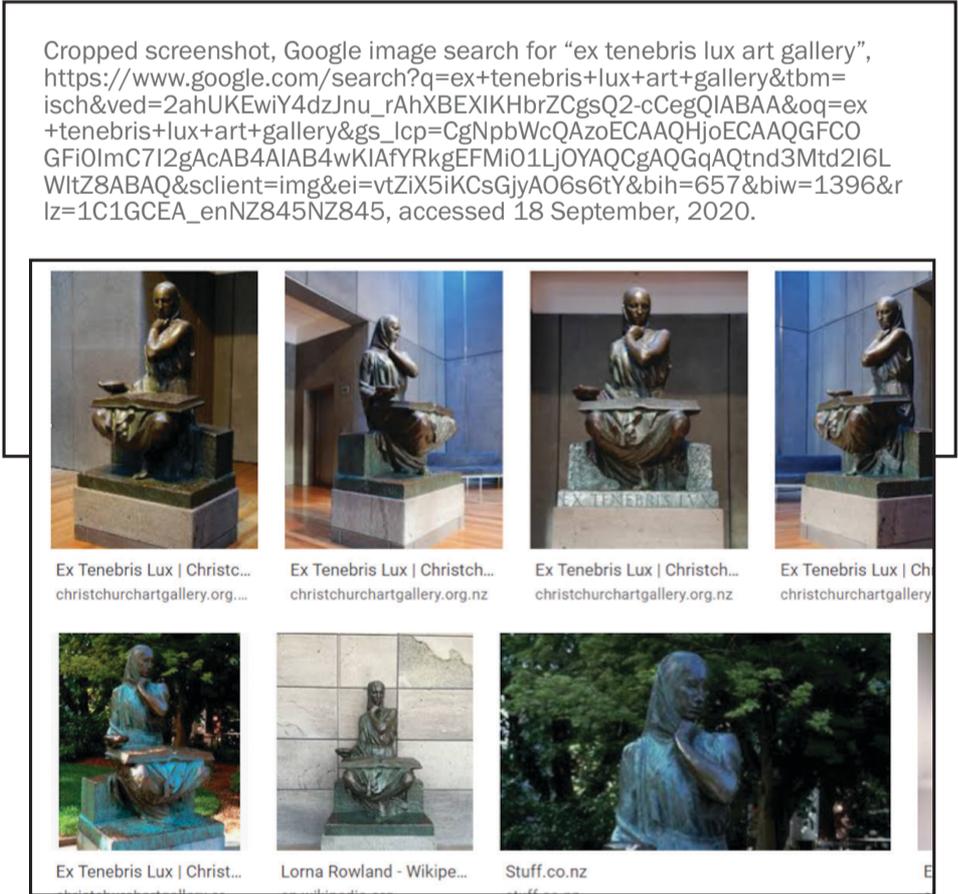
I go looking for digital art collective JODI’s new online work *ICTI.ME* (2020), which replicates glitches found on social media. Ask Prof. Google. Instead I end up at *DrCorona.Online* (2020),<sup>9</sup> a project from Ye Funa that is part of the same online group exhibition.<sup>10</sup> Word art meets madlibs. It’s ugly and funny and nonsensical. It invites me to ask about coronavirus, “Or Any Other Questions You Are Concerned About”. I ask it: “what do you believe in?” Every answer is different.



Cropped screenshot, “柯大夫在线 Dr.Corona online”, [http://drcorona.online/question\\_en](http://drcorona.online/question_en), accessed 20 July, 2020.

**POSITION**

The Christchurch Art Gallery’s website lets you curate your own gallery. You can “collect all your favourite bits of the gallery in one place”, everything you want and nothing you don’t, but they are only reproductions of my favourite bits, it’s not being with the bits themselves. I look up Ernest Gillick’s bronze statue of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, *Ex Tenebris Lux* (1937), from darkness comes light. I used to climb on her when she was outdoors in the Botanic Gardens. She was covered in bird shit and plant detritus, now she’s smooth and quiet and out of bounds, the verdigris cleaned away. You can’t speak too loudly in a gallery or someone with a lanyard will tell you off. She’s physical but you can’t touch.

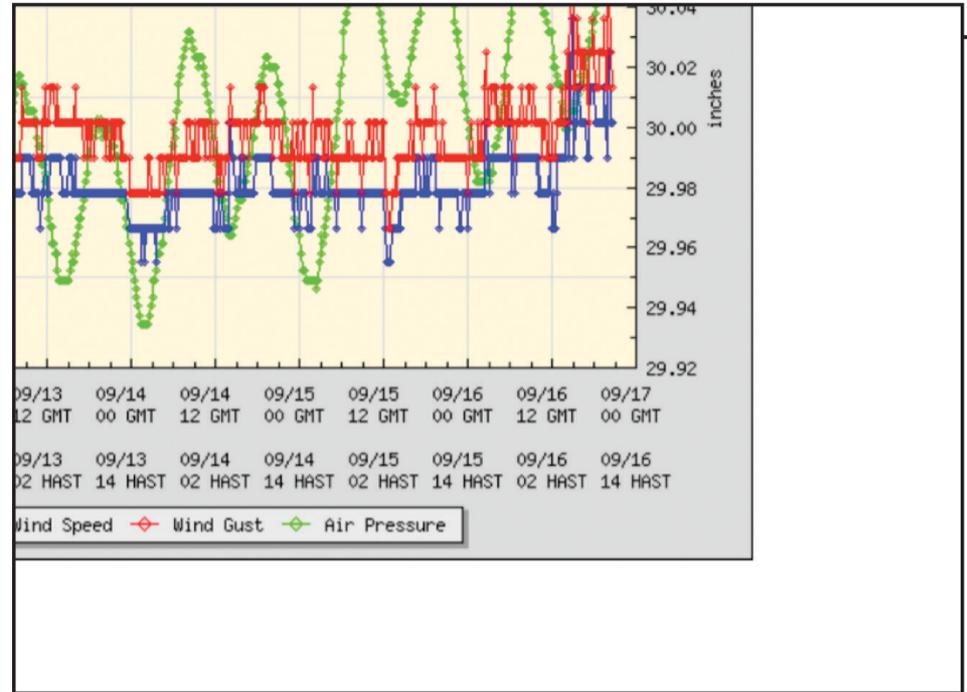


9. “柯大夫在线 Dr.Corona online”, accessed 20 July, 2020, <http://www.drcorona.online/>.

10. “We=Link: Ten Easy Pieces”, New Museum, accessed 20 September, 2020, <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/we-equals-link-ten-easy-pieces>.

**BELIEF**

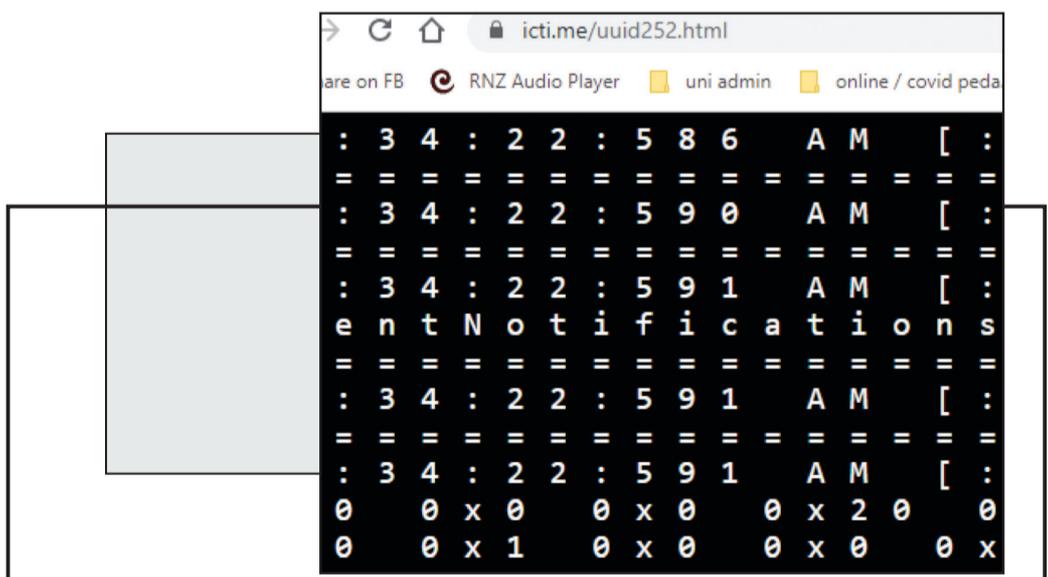
There's a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data buoy bobbing around in the Pacific Ocean. There's many, really, but this one went adrift in April 2011 southwest of Honolulu, position unknown, but it still communicates the intensity and movement of the water. It's alone and remote; the diligent WALL-E of buoys. In David Bowen's installation *tele-present water* (2011), one of his many works that play with environmental data, this information was made manifest in a suspended, articulated mechanical grid structure that simulates the effects of the movement of the water's surface, like a geometric marionette.<sup>11</sup> You can watch it on Vimeo—it's hypnotic. It's a wave (hello), a wave (water), a gesture, an echo, oceanic reportage, capacious, indifferent, a dream of itself, and a rough measure of exteriority mediated through wires and servomotors. It clicks and hums. That installation is gone now, and a newer one uses cascading LEDs. But you can still see the buoy's observational data online: wind speed, wind gust, atmospheric pressure, water temperature, a time series plot of five days of information.<sup>12</sup> Every ten minutes it says "hello world hello world hello world", the very existence of its broadcast, a belief that something somewhere will receive.



Cropped screenshot, "NDBC - 5-day plot - Wind Speed, Wind Gust and Atmospheric Pressure at 51003" National Data Buoy Center, [https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/show\\_plot.php?station=51003&meas=wdpr&uom=E&time\\_diff=-10&time\\_label=HAST](https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/show_plot.php?station=51003&meas=wdpr&uom=E&time_diff=-10&time_label=HAST), accessed 17 September, 2020.

**JUDGMENT**

I go looking for digital art collective JODI's online work *ICTI.ME* (2020), which replicates glitches found on social media. The link is back up so I find it, no net villains here. It has rapid strobe effects interspersed with computer code about sleep wake failures that make me feel like I'm being violated by my laptop. I kinda want to vomit. It's angry and unruly, like the internet is laughing at me and my inability to process data quickly enough.



Cropped Screenshot, "M:2523 0x92", ICTI.ME, <https://icti.me/uuid252.html>, accessed 20 July, 2020.

11. "tele-present water", David Bowen, accessed 1 September, 2020, <https://www.dwbowen.com/telepresentwater>.  
 12. "NDBC - Station 51003 Recent Data", National Data Buoy Center, accessed 17 September, 2020, [https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/station\\_page.php?station=51003](https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/station_page.php?station=51003).

## **AXIOM**

I believe my ability to self-regulate and reflect critically is both well-developed and fragmenting. I believe responding to art is a natural reflex, like breathing, and a muscle that needs exercising, and something parasitic, and hard work. I've written this piece at home on the couch, in the armchair I use when my back is bad, in the cold spare room, at work at my desk, a bit on my phone, on the backs of envelopes. Cut and paste till your eyes ache. Add in COVID, and there's something in my head about lockdown and heterotopia. Chronopolitics and ready-salted chips on the sofa. Since lockdown I've looked at exhibitions in Melbourne and New York and Seoul, streamed theatre recorded in performance spaces and on Zoom, live-streamed life drawing from people's homes on Facebook Live, seminars from the USA and the UK and down the road, artist talks and masterclasses from Brisbane and Edinburgh and Auckland, a book launch in Yorkshire, a handbell ensemble concert from rural Virginia. I've said I'll look at friends' online work and have (for hours, for 30 seconds before flicking between tabs). You have to process this noise somehow. Arts ecologies are teeming and proliferating but stuck in the same language of call and response. The language of promo is pornographic and not in the fun way. I'm sick of interventions and affinities and provocations, fuck activations, I'm still in my PJs deactivated. I've participated in streamed talks and panels, I've written reviews of audio plays and hard copy books and digitised theatre, I've updated my broadband to fibre to upload videos more quickly for work, I've commented on posts, I've DM'd, I've blocked, I've written letters of support for art orgs, I reach out and it's all just there. I can't tell if it's empty calories, content, a product, content, an output, content, rich material, experience, content, and I am a leech, not uploading as much as I've taken. I'm ratio'd (in the Twitter sense), I am ratio'd (in the p2p sense), I can't tell if I'm still hungry or if I was full-to-bursting months ago. I believe in the world wide web but it's all so flattened out it curves in on itself and disappears, unfinished, all light no dark, all dark no light.

What follows is a facsimile of an article I wrote about the 2010–2015 Dunedin Power Silence music scene as it appeared in issue #8 of Pittsburgh's experimental music zine *Bzzzt*, in November 2019.

Since writing and researching this article I also recorded a more comprehensive radio documentary on Montreal's CKUT 90.3FM which includes illuminating interviews with people who were involved in the scene. You can listen to it on The Physics Room's website: [physicsroom.org.nz](http://physicsroom.org.nz) or mine: [spencerhall.co.nz](http://spencerhall.co.nz).

I'd like to thank Icarus Watkins, Tim Player, Erica Snow, and Benny Matthews for their guidance and access to the ephemera included in this article, Hamish Petersen and Jamie Hanton from The Physics Room for their patience and support, the editorial team at *Bzzzt*, and Isaac Hickey, Aaron Hawkins, Alex Moskos, Jörg Bendt, Chris Schmeltz, Nick White, Alex Wolken, and Simon Sweetman for taking the time to talk to me.

A compilation titled *Shhh...!: Dunedin Silence 2010–2015* will be released early next year by the Dead Air Collective.

- Spencer Hall, December 2020



*Unknown KULT release courtesy of Benny Matthews*

The first physical releases and stirrings of the scene which I encountered were blank (as far as I could tell) cassette tapes by a project called KULT which claimed to have been recorded "in the snow-laden woods of Normanby". A compilation of tracks from these would later be rereleased on CDR by the Dead Air record label who also took as their logo the alchemical symbols which were

## The Dunedin Silence

by Spencer Hall

"Don't be a bigot and shut the f\*ck up" - Anonymous Dunedin Power Silence poster

This quote appeared as a very small typeface on A3 posters plastered up around Dunedin in late 2010, precipitating a trend in the Dunedin experimental music scene that was to follow, towards sound in minutia from various angles which came to be known as either The Dunedin Silence or Power Silence.

Many of the people in this scene I reached out to felt that commenting on it was against the Ethos of Silence and asked to not be mentioned by name, so any omission of details is out of respect for their wishes.

Just one final caveat: this article is from my point of view as someone outside the scene looking in, and not as a practitioner. That is to say that although I have done my best to aim for accuracy some of the information that follows is informed by this limited perspective.

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scrawled on these tapes so I feel their importance can't be overstated. One performance at Port Chalmers venue The Anteroom which really impressed me was Peripatus; a pair of two youngish punks, a guy and a girl who explained they had recorded the various environments where the rare, endangered Velvet Worm (Peripatus) lived and were projecting not the sound of these spaces but instead their sonic characteristics with mics set up to catch and delay specific reverb. The phenomenological shift in the space was huge, it was as if we'd been shrunken down and the building was no longer a hall but a cavernous tunnel. This gave way to other environments during their set and a few people felt so discombobulated by its effects that they had to leave and cool off in the garden outside.

The message of Peripatus was of ecology and conservation for this amazing prehistoric native Dunedin creature and they had screenprinted fact sheets about Peripatus and a lathecut EP titled Ngaokeoke of field recordings they'd made around Dunedin, the Catlins and Southern Alps.



Peripatus lathecut 7-inch record Ngaokeoke  
courtesy of Tim Player

Another artist whose performances were exercises in sculpting their venues with sound was Stripper Freq who wrote a manifesto titled The Art Of Silence which was a large influence on the scene, a sort of clever subversion and loving homage to Luigi Russolo's landmark Futurist manifesto; The Art of Noise. What follows is an excerpt from this manifesto, reprinted from an untitled zine by noise artist Icarus Watkins which in turn is taken from a piece of corresponsance between Stripper Freq to Peripatus.

The Art of Silence  
My dear [redacted] the great noise musician  
On [redacted], when we stopped during our muddy  
walk deep in the abandoned rail tunnel  
under Caversham over a kilometre in the  
dark wet and grime, I understood  
for the first time the true nature and  
power of this Silent Music, Silence  
performed by powerful nothingness, when  
suddenly, intuitively, my mind conceived a  
new art that only our genius can create  
The Art Of Silence, the logical  
consequence of all our audiological  
tinkerings and post-sonic innovation.  
Before everything there was only silence  
Since the Big Bang it feels like silence  
has only become harder to come by. Today

silence remains elusive to most with noise  
reigning supreme over human sensibility.  
The quietest still always being shaped by the space  
around us. We must make Intense silence!  
Prolonged silence! Power silence!  
Even in a noisy universe there are plenty  
of things already silent, stones, moss, an  
unstruck bell, smells, a switched off radio,  
the dead are silent, not to mention the  
vacuum of space. to listen to real silence  
for the first time will be truly amazing.  
Some groups of people attribute silence to  
devine origin. The devout and holy of many  
faiths will take vows of silence and  
there are the librarians who thanklessly  
enforce silence and thereby enrich their  
halls with learned intrigue. From this is  
developed a conception of silence as  
something apart, different from independent  
life. The result? A fantastic world  
superimposed upon reality, an inviolable  
and sacred world. Pure atmosphere with  
none of those messy sine waves trying to  
slow down the progress of music. With this  
we bypass sound completely. People keep  
thinking about silence only in its  
unfolding through time, a narrow conception  
that fails to grasp the nuance and subtlety  
in silence's complexity. We must explore  
this complexity and experiment with the

simultaneous unions of different silences  
(that is to say a complex silence or  
cluster silence)  
Early on musical art looked for the soft  
and limpid purity of sound. Then it  
amalgamated different sounds, intent upon  
caressing the ear with suave harmonies.  
Nowadays musical art aims at the shrillest,  
strangest and most dissonant  
amalgams of sound. Thus we are approaching  
the noise event horizon. The new soundless  
music, of silent music revolution is  
inevitable. To excite our sensibility,  
Power Silence must develop into a search  
for the quietest and most profound  
silence varieties. Contemporary sound has  
tried to obtain even the most complex and  
dissonant noises, thus preparing the  
ground for 'musical silence'.  
This evolution towards completely soundless  
music is only possible today.  
We must break at all costs from this  
restrictive circle of sounds and conquer the  
infinite void of silence. Each sound carries  
with it a nucleus of foreknown and foregone  
sensations predisposing the auditor to  
boredom, in spite of all the efforts of  
innovating composers.

Stripper Freq was a transgender physics student who performed sets consisting of powerful noise-cancelling inverse waves to strip back frequencies in the venue until there would be an almost palpable dread and anxiety-inducing silence.

People would stomp and yell but Stripper Freq held the power over every sound frequency in the room.

None Gallery had a noise complaint from a nearby hotel due to the noise-cancellation waves, rendering the noise of the its patrons null.

This show also featured political performance art silence acts Shush and The Loss Adjuster which featured future Dunedin Mayor Aaron Hawkins, the then Radio One music director.

It was through this Radio One connection that I got to know Entoptics and host them on my late-night experimental show "The Odditties Show". They were interested in magnification, periphery, auras and entropy.



Me at Radio One during a 2011 episode of The Odditties Show with Entoptics record Unbewusster Schluss

Most of their performances were rituals with objects they considered charged with some kind of silent power, which they contained in microphoned, anechoic chambers; totally sound-dead boxes. These were then run through an expensive mixer which could isolate and boost certain frequencies, then amplified over the venue's soundsystem.

Some of the most memorable objects they ran through their setup were: the piece of gum one member of Entoptics had in her mouth the first time she was ever kissed, a bright silk scarf that belonged to Rita Angus and the inkwell of Belgian cartoonist Spijn. They later released a zine which detailed their performance objects.

Entoptics also had a sense of humour which was an element of Dunedin Power Silence that is often neglected. For example an ancient donut from the display case of fish and chip shop across the street from The Crown Hotel was memorably put under their sonic scrutiny when they were on the bill for one of the Crown's Psychedelic Folk Nights and an exhibition they had at Lanyiop Gallery included a bag of gravel from the driveway of David Kilgour, guitarist of The Clean.

Isaac Hickey from the band Astro Children is also a big fan of The Clean and held onto this relic before passing it onto me as a present years later.

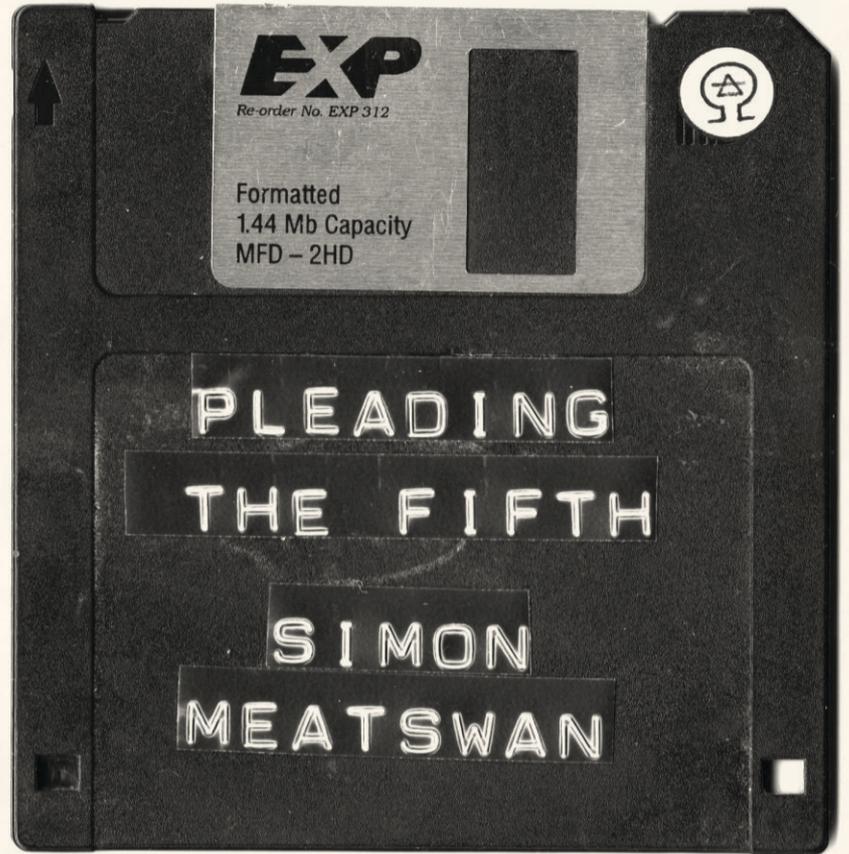


Bag of David Kilgour's Driveway Gravel  
Courtesy of Isaac Hickey

Entoptics members Erica and Craig Snow went on to form perhaps the most successful group of the scene: 50Hurtz (or 60Hurtz depending on the country they were in) performing 50 (or 60) hertz tones at super quiet volumes while adjusting their texture and other sonic properties. They garnered some success overseas, touring North America with bands including AIDS Wolf and Grouper, European sound art festivals and a release on record label Siltbreeze.

Back home in New Zealand however a growing sentiment of dismissal of the Dunedin Power Silence sometimes gave way to outright hostility. A scathing treatise titled "A Silence Closely Resembling Stupidity" blew up on social media before being covered in Critic Magazine in an article by Sam Valentine. Contrarian New Zealand music blogger Simon Sweetman was quoted in this article as saying the scene "all sounded like a bunch of flimflam, emperors new clothes artwank".

A response was released by Secret Ions under the name Simon Meatswan on a floppy disk, a collection of recordings and blank documents with puzzles embedded in their metadata.



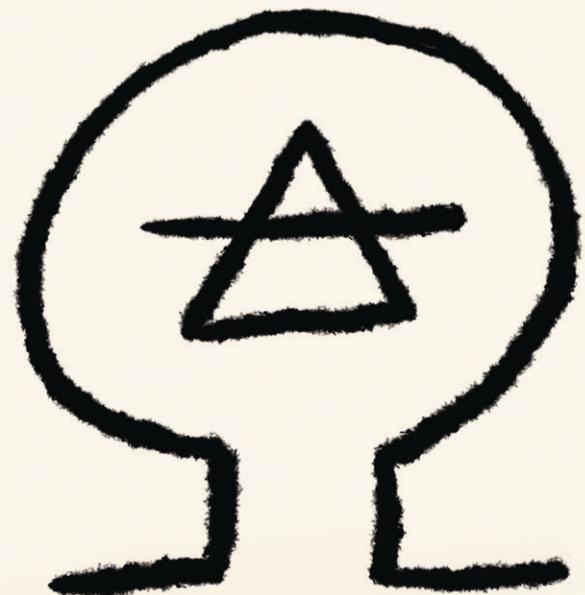
Pleading the Fifth Floppy Disk  
Courtesy of Icarus Watkins

Secret Ions had one of the finest sets of those years which may have been my favourite before Chicks Hotel shut down. It was a collaboration with the artist Nigel Bunn for the festival Lines of Flight. They handed out cassette walkmen with headphones to everyone in the audience which they'd prepared, each one subtly different to effect the playback of the blank tapes contained within. It was such a great sight seeing all the people wearing them, enjoying their own individual intimate sound experience together. The performance was also heightened by the bar fridges being shut off for the set and projections across the walls showing morphing and burning sigils provided by Lady Lazerlight. That was one of the last shows I went to before I left Dunedin and Chicks Hotel shut down.

Many people in that scene left at around that time. I shifted to Lyttelton and would occasionally see some members of the scene perform at Christchurch gallery

The Auricle. Kerian Varaine installed copper wires outside the venue to receive radio transmissions from the aether.

The Dead Air Collective had their last Silence gig at the Port Chalmers Pioneer Hall in March 2015 where they announced they were going to fall completely silent to bring the whole ordeal to a logical full stop.



Dead Air Logo

# Belief in Knowing

Nina Oberg  
Humphries

## **ACT 1**

“You will never believe what happened to me.”

*“What?”*

“This man just walked right into my house and took all my stuff. I mean this strange man wearing strange clothes just walked right into my house and took all my stuff. At first I was like what tha, this guy’s lost? I asked, ‘Can I help you? Are you lost?’ But he said nothing, he just kept filling his arms with all my stuff. I chased him out the door and wrestled him onto the sand, he didn’t have much balance there. Some things fell to the ground, but he was tricky and got back up. I was yelling at him ‘GIVE ME MY THINGS, GIVE ME MY STUFF!’ Then he shoved two sticks bound together into my face and said, ‘Jesus will save you.’ Jesus? Who is Jesus and why does he want my stuff?”

*“What happened?”*

“He got away, took off to all of his mates on their strange boat. Man I had never been so angry, that stuff belonged to my family since before I could remember. They took a long time to make and a long time to learn how to make them.”

*“So what did you do?”*

“What do you mean? I just had to remake them.  
Learn how to make them and do it. I did still have my Atua,  
he looked after me.”

*“That’s good.”*

“Yeah.”

## **ACT 2**

“You will never believe what happened to me.”

“*What?*”

“That man, that strange man on his strange boat wearing those strange clothes.”

“*Yeah, you told me already.*”

“Well, he came back. I mean he came back with all his mates and took the Atua he didn’t get the first time.”

“*What!*”

“This time I was ready, I set up a trap for him on the beach. But when we got outside, I saw everybody else happily handing their Atua to all those other strange men.”

“*You’re joking.*”

“I asked my neighbour, ‘Hey what are you doing?’ He said, ‘Give him your Tangaroa, They told us that if we accept Jesus into our hearts, he will save us ... ’”

“*What did you do?*”

“Um, what do you mean? I handed it over.”

“*What! Not your Tangaroa?!*”

“Yip, I did—I thought, well if everybody else is doing it and the Ariki said it was ok then why not? What’s the worst that could happen? I’m sure I could remember how to make another one if I need it. I handed it over to the strange man and he put it in his strange boat, the rest were burned.”

“*Why did he take your one?*”

“I think it was because it was the best. My great, great, great, great Grandfather carved it. He was a master carver.”

“*Oh that’s good they kept it.*”

“Yip, and I tell you what. I learnt all about that Jesus guy and I let him into my heart, and he saved me. I love him, and he loves me. I really can’t remember what I did before he came along. I learnt all about his life; how he died for our sins

and his mates. I even named my son after one, loane, cool yeah. It was also the name of that strange man that came the first time. loane Viliamu is what the Samoans call him.”

“*He must have been pretty cool.*”

“Yip, he gave me some of his strange clothes and I learnt that strange book he brought with him by heart. I was the best! A good strange person just like them. So good that they let me on their strange boat. I came here. I jumped on that boat and I came to this strange land where there were more strange people. Before leaving I practiced all their strange, funny language and learnt all the right strange things to say, like yes sir no sir. They said I would be great.”

“*Then what happened?*”

“Well, when I got here, I was no longer the good stranger person. I was just strange.”

**ACT 3**

“I came to New Zealand when I was 12. My mother sent me here to send back money. Things are getting expensive back home and I am the oldest so that is what I must do. I am staying with a nice family on a farm. I am the house girl, and they are very good to me. A handful of us girls got picked. We only speak English here just like at school back home. Me and the other Cook Island girls practice at night after we put all the kids to sleep and do the washing up. People cannot roll their Rs here, they tried to say my name when I first arrived, but now, they call me June. June is a nice name, I guess.”

**ACT 4**

“Did I ever tell you about the time I went to the British Museum?”

“No.”

“Well I went to the British Museum. In fact, I paid \$3450.45 plus a £10 admission fee to go to the British Museum.”

“Why did you go?”

“I had read in a journal that the London Missionary Society had a really good example of an Atua, so I went to go see it. I tried to get them to send me some photos or tell me what they knew about it. They eventually sent me an email saying, ‘Item C2001X: God, Wood, Cook Islands.’ I replied, asking for more information, but they didn’t have any. I had never seen one and not many people talk about him now, so I booked some flights and off I went. When I got there, I asked to see it, but they said I should have planned that months before I came. They did however point me to a book written by some guy from Scotland. I couldn’t buy a copy, I didn’t have any more cash, but I took a photo of the photo in the book. That’s it on the fridge. I tried to carve an Atua once, but I didn’t really know what I was doing, it just looked like a hacked blob. That’s it in that pot plant. My Granddad told me his super, super, super, great, great, great Grandfather was a master carver. No one in the family took it up.”

**ACT 5**

“Guess what just happened to me.”

*“Here we go, what?”*

“This white man yelled at me today, told me to go back to my own country!”

“What?”

“I know right. I just gave him the fingers and yelled back, ‘Hey you, I’ve been here for three generations, dick.’”

*“Good work. You showed him sis.”*

“I told my Dad, he just got angry at me. He said, ‘That’s not what we do, we must always be polite.’ He always says things like that.”

*“Like what?”*

“You know, that I need to learn more about my culture, behave. I don’t know why, he doesn’t speak any Cook Islands Māori either, so who am I meant to learn from? He tells me it’s only one piece of the puzzle and there are things that you ‘just know’ but I don’t understand what that means yet. Anyway, I was like, come on Dad it’s 2020, you know, Pacific Pride! The other day I asked him to draw me an Atua, he looked confused. So, I took the pen off him and drew this. What do you think?”

*“Yeah that’s it, that’s my Atua.”*

Nina Oberg Humphries, *I CALL TO HER*, CoCA Summer Performance Series, 2016. Image: Janneth Gil. Courtesy: Centre of Contemporary Art Toi Moroki.



### **Connecting Through Objects**

When I think about my art practice there is no such thing, my art is life practice. My experience of being in this world drives my making and my making is who I am. It is the same with my beliefs and how they drive my making.

I am a second generation Cook Islander who grew up, and lives, in Christchurch. I have had very little interaction with my Cook Islands heritage apart from fly-by visits to Rarotonga filled with tourist hot spots. What I have learnt came from books and the amazing resource that is Coconet, and I don't think I am alone in this experience.

In 2016, I was able to go into Canterbury Museum's storehouses to see the amazing collection of Pacific artifacts. This was the first time I had seen or felt anything made by my ancestors up close and in the real. It blew my mind, opened a can of worms with questions, and many of the questions I had—and still have—can never be answered by a living soul.

After this interaction with the collection I conjured up a performance titled *I CALL TO HER* for a performance series run by the Centre for Contemporary Art. I reimagined myself as an ancestor of now, this lost Cook Islands woman trying to find my place in an extremely Anglo-Saxon environment. I made myself a headpiece, painted marks on my body, not really knowing if what I was doing was politically correct, or really caring. I summoned my tīpuna and I danced through that museum to a mash-up of opera, Pacific hymns, and a poem Danielle O'Halloran had written, *Would you dance with the old ones?*

And I did. I danced with the old ones stretching my fingers to the sky and touching the old stone walls of the museum wishing them safe passage, protection, and aroha for the

items and those who whakapapa to them. To the taonga that had been taken, gifted, and sold to be where they were and still are today. I thought about how the octopus lure from Niue had fed many. How the lei niho palaoa from Tahiti must have been worn by someone of great mana and how the fans from the Cook Islands had kept someone comfortable after a long day's work. I felt the Moana move up and through my legs as I stepped forward into what was an uncomfortable space. My body had taken on a new meaning during this time and my understanding of Va lifted to a higher level; an infinite space of intersections being pulled and pushed at the same time. I had become a translation of these taonga sitting in their boxes above our heads. A physical representation of people, their stories, and the travelled Moana.

Reflecting on this experience now, I realise it has become the centre of my wairua for where I am now; my transitional turangawaewae. The understanding that I am only a vehicle in constant transition propped up by the collective power that is my ancestors, somewhere I give weight and desperately need to be in this world.

With no word for art in the Pacific and no definition of past, present, and future these taonga can not be characterised by western ideas or cataloguing methods. Their spirits can only be upheld by the language in which they are made; in which they were intended by their makers and reinterpreted by their heirs. Unfortunately, this leaves us with more questions, but also with new opportunities to discover and define their meaning in ways that speak to us now. Ways which heal us, help us to reflect, and move through to uncover parts of ourselves we never knew existed. An inherent mana of knowledge and system of knowing.

# Makes You Nervous

Eloise  
Callister-Baker

In March 2020, Aotearoa went into lockdown. Many of us were almost entirely confined to our homes. We were confronted by ourselves and for those of us living with others we shared significant time and space. During this straining time, I interviewed artists about their beliefs.

The artists I talked to had all participated in the “new artist” exhibitions at Artspace Aotearoa, the longest running annual exhibition of “new artists” in the country. I contacted artists who had participated in the 1998, 1999, 2008, 2009, 2018, or 2019 iterations of the exhibition. These artists have shared the experience of participating in this exhibition at often critical transition points in their lives. As the only annual exhibition of its kind in Aotearoa, a belief in its significance has been cultivated, whether or not this aligns with Artspace or the participating artists’ intentions. The new artist exhibitions themselves are important as they not only provide a rich pool of participants for me to survey, they also provide a shared context in which each artist could consider my questions.

Expressions of art and belief have a long and complex relationship. As the daughter of a liberal minister and an academic who dragged us to art openings every week, belief has always been openly discussed in my household, but I still find the concept hard to pin down. What I am sure of, is that to situate one's life and work in the art world, as with the religious world, takes incredible belief and vocation. In Aotearoa, with the exception of a select few, working in either world is no longer particularly conventional or lucrative.

Despite its intensity, a vocation cannot always be described. It may be too intimate or too complicated. Many of the artists I contacted either never replied or did not want to be involved. The artists who follow are the ones who answered my questions and consented to their publication. There is an inherent vulnerability and generosity in their responses.

**Xander Dixon**

**4/4**

**11 October – 9 November 2019**

**What are you making work about?**

My childhood home is Kaioruru Church Bay, of Te Pataka o Rakaihautū Banks Peninsula. There's a cliff-top track near our house, where I would walk with our dog most days after school. A recent kōrero showed me that the valleys I used to scuffle around are actually scars of old quarry sites, mined for ship ballast in the mid-19th century.

Recent work of mine has considered the presence of multiple landscapes within conservation space, layered histories of cultural and ecological interactions. It didn't feel right to be so out of touch with an area I've probably spent more time in than anywhere else. I'm working on a moving image work for Window Gallery later in the year, and I hope to embrace this pull to the Peninsula.

**What do you believe in?**

This question has dragged me a wee bit. Five years ago I think I would have said something boring like "oh I'm just an atheist", but now this seems so reductive and one dimensional. I'm uncomfortable with the common ground of proud atheists and white supremacy, the space in which faith can be shunned or attacked. However, I wasn't brought up religious, and don't consider myself to be 'of' a certain faith. Thinking beyond belief in the context of faith, I am putting energy into my belief in the potential of sustained anti-racism work, long walks in the bush and hot, passionate friendships.

**What do you not believe in?**

Permanence... things change. Perhaps a cringe note to finish on, but still.

**Wai Ching Chan**

***The River Remains; ake tonu atu***

**15 September – 20 October 2018**

**What are you making work about?**

I am currently planning a new collaborative work with my tino hoa Arapeta. In 2018, Arapeta and I had made a video work on our friendship – and from there bringing light to normalise the friendship between tauiwi and tangata whenua. It reflects on the relationships we form as tauiwi upon arrival. This work sounds political to some but mainly it's more hearty and warm than anything else. We spoke of Manaakitanga whakawhanaungatanga and aroha. This is something that is very personal for me as well as it's important to everything. I'm thinking a lot about how relationships sometimes are politicised(?). and thinking when I'm working towards these themes with the intention of honouring, caring and warmth... Do I risk the genuineness of building the relationship?

**What do you believe in?**

Friendship and equity. Collective and unity. Integrity. Also I believe that friendship is the foundation of any connection – a foundation for mutual respect.

**What do you not believe in?**

Individualistic tendencies. Relationships that form solely for the purpose of benefits. Seeing people as commodities or tools. I don't know how to word it... I don't like to function without being considerate and compassionate. I might not be best at it, but I try my best to do so.

**Emma Tavola**

***New Artists Show 2009: Fresh Gallery***

***Otara Newcall, None***

**5 September – 10 October 2009**

**What are you making work about?**

I'm still making exhibitions that shed light on narrative histories that are neglected by dominant mainstream culture, about issues that deserve to have air breathed into them and light shone on them. The last three exhibitions I produced were about gentrification in South Auckland, radical fat positivity within Māori and Pacific communities and the revolutionary art of Emory Douglas and the power of the poster.

**What do you believe in?**

I believe in the power of art to facilitate conversations that can shift perception and effect change. I believe in the abilities of art to be activism and contribute to decolonisation.

**What do you not believe in?**

Colonial narratives. There's always another side of the story that has not been recorded / accounted for / remembered.

**Do you think your answers have changed from the time of your Artspace Aotearoa new artist show? If so, how?**

Have become more optimistic / pessimistic in equal measures.

**Sasha Savtchenko**

***Architecture for the Nation: New Artists Show 2008***

**14 June – 19 July 2008**

**What are you making work about?**

After studying art I wanted to be free of "explaining" why something was art, free of having to have a text in the show, of having to package up my practice to be a commodity, so I thought I could escape by saying it was simply what it was. I studied architecture as I could not abide speculation, and wanted to reach deep into the stuff. Today I am working on a staircase in Palermo, in a ruined monastic complex repurposed as a church, a school and a home for refugees, migrants, and other asylum seekers.

**What do you believe in?**

I believe that human beings are limited in many ways, and have a lot of wasted potential. Our animal side is very adaptable, and this is tragic. I believe we took a wrong turn somewhere and that culture is in decline. On the other hand, I believe that when someone is creating something extremely beautiful... whether it be visually beautiful or conceptually beautiful, really funny or eloquent, or something that somehow manages to reach into the heart of a person or a culture or a society, and to cause a stir there or a release of emotion... such as when one encounters what one knows to be true – I believe that this is not done by the hand alone, but that some sacred energy gets involved in this movement.... it's like magic and beauty and creation all wrapped into one everlasting ecstatic and simultaneously heartbreaking moment, and it is the reason for living. I believe in truth and honesty. I also believe that beauty and truth are somehow linked to nature and harmonious structure of the human mind. So, in short - I believe in beauty. Also that it is not a material quality, but a spiritual one, and therefore it exists not in objects but in perception, so it's useless to argue about whether something is beautiful or not. I believe in the miracle of conception. I believe in a kind of intercourse between the Apollonian and Dionysian, in balance and flow, that this is a kind of ideal... that even if ideals do not materially exist, they exist conceptually and help to point the way, so and this is what I am "working towards".

**Do you think your answers have changed from the time of your Artspace Aotearoa new artist show? If so, how?**

Have my beliefs changed? I don't think so, not much. In 2008, I believed in similar things. But since then, I have learned a lot about western culture and how we came to be where we are, so my answer is perhaps a bit more contextual than it would have been back then. Or at least I hope so.

**Andrew McLeod**  
***Only the Lonely: New Artists Show 1999***  
**9 June – 2 July 1999**

**What are you making work about?**

I still make work, mostly paintings, at the moment I'm working on a show of what I think of as ensemble portraits. What the work is about is different from the more important question of what the purpose of the works is. I hope these paintings reveal some things about human nature.

**What do you believe in?**

Question 2 makes me nervous because last time I was asked that question was about 20 years ago and I responded with genuine confusion, my friend (at the time) was really angry at me, it really pissed her off. I still have this kind of reaction to my way of thinking sometimes. I just hope that Art is a refuge for people who honestly don't understand mainstream culture.

**What do you not believe in?**

I will slightly contradict and possibly annoy readers of the last answer by saying in an easy way 'well I don't believe in the deities of any organised religion'. But am I only saying this to identify and aspire towards an educated bohemian dream?

**Do you think your answers have changed from the time of your Artspace Aotearoa new artist show? If so, how?**

Yes the answers are the same but there is more sadness now. My cloistered Art life has been inadequate compensation for my inability to participate with more meaning, purpose and integration within larger society. I wish I could have been a nurse or a teacher, but I could not have been. Artists should be open to the idea that we are not important, we are just doing our best. The knowledge and regret at my unimportance and inability to be better informs my answers now. 20 years ago I was defiant.

**Yvonne Todd**  
***Only the Lonely: New Artists Show 1999***  
**9 June – 2 July 1999**

**What are you making work about?**

I am making work, but it's coming together slowly as I process the upheaval of the past few months. Lockdown was creatively stifling, as the focus was on day-to-day routines, particularly keeping three small children fed and entertained.

**What do you believe in?**

Silliness, humour, plant-based eating, inclusiveness, visual excitement, acceptance of personal limitations, space to fail, an appreciation of the obscure.

**What do you not believe in?**

The usual shitty things - racism, homophobia, transphobia. Animal cruelty.

**Do you think your answers have changed from the time of your Artspace Aotearoa new artist show? If so, how?**

I don't know how I would have replied to these questions 21 years ago. At the time, I was an emerging artist, my priorities were different and I probably felt I had something to prove. Since then, I've been able to let go from a desperate, clown-like hunger for attention and not feel so needy and insecure about myself and my work.

**Hadleigh Averill**

**Only the Lonely: New Artists Show 1999**

**9 June – 2 July 1999**

**What are you making work about?**

Social engineering as informed by relational art.

**What do you believe in?**

Cause and effect.

**What do you not believe in?**

The idea of a self beyond the parameters of a belief construct, determined by the process of identification.

**Do you think your answers have changed from the time of your Artspace Aotearoa new artist show? If so, how?**

No. My focus has shifted from art practice to spiritual practice.

**Megan Dunn**

**Come: New Artists Show 1998**

**11 August – 29 August 1998**

**What are you making work about?**

I'm finishing a book of linked essays called *Things I Learned at Art School*. It's about some of the things I learned in art school and a lot of things I didn't learn there and perhaps will never learn. I am also wrestling with the fragmented draft of my mermaid book - like all my ideas, they seem to have to flop massively, before they can resurface in some new hitherto unimagined form.

**What do you believe in?**

I have a troubled relationship to the word belief. I am superstitious to the max. I believe in art to a point. I believe we live and then we die, trying to make meaning in between - what happens next I don't know. I believe in the widthband of a wonderful idea, a white hand dipped in paint and pressed on the wall of a cave, I believe beauty counts even though it shape-shifts and makes a lot of enemies along the way.

**What do you not believe in?**

I don't believe ideas are as important as I once did, I think form and craft, knick knack and know how matters more, ideas will follow form. I think culture is a whirlpool endlessly churning and what we believe in and don't believe can be caught in an endless spin cycle. One generation's ideas might get spat out - drowned, slam dunked. Then later resurface. Still churning.

**Do you think your answers have changed from the time of your Artspace Aotearoa new artist show? If so, how?**

It is a long time ago and I am sure things have changed. Then I might have believed more in a unique idea and that for art to last it needed to find an expression to befit its time. I still see that happening but it matters less to me. What I know now is that youth is an asset and makes the sell of any idea - even a bad one - easier. I still believe in the subconscious mind though I recognise this has a historical legacy and limitation. I believe money really matters and that's something I didn't understand well enough in 1998.

**Artist  
2009**

I'd very much like to contribute to the article but belief is so very personal and profound. The invitation has made me realise how much I appreciate art's ability to embody and present belief meaningfully. Your questions are very worthy and I appreciate *HAMSTER* giving space to this kind of issue, but I can't shake my reticence about publishing my thoughts on the subject in a platform set up for critical debate. When so much of what I do as an artist is up for public consumption I feel protective of that part of myself. I hope you understand why I'd prefer to let my work speak for me on this subject.

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